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General debate on national experience in population matters: new trends in migration — demographic aspects

Statement submitted by Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

According to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, as of 2010, an estimated 3.1 per cent of the global population were international migrants. Around half of the international migrants are women, as they have been for several decades. Furthermore, according to the 2009 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme, there are approximately 740 million internal migrants. This makes a total of about 1 billion persons, or one in seven people on Earth, currently living outside their country or region of origin. Migrants contribute essential economic functions and increase competitiveness in several sectors. According to the World Bank, global remittance flows to developing countries were estimated to have exceeded $400 billion in 2012 and are largely unaffected by the economic crisis.

Migrants move in search of a better life. Though the intersections between migration and development are complex, migration, international and internal, affects development and development affects migration. Migration offers development opportunities to the migrants themselves, their households and the communities and countries they leave and those they join. For women migrants in particular, the Secretary-General has noted that "International migration can be an empowering experience for women: women may leave situations where they have limited options for ones where they exercise greater autonomy over their own lives, thereby benefiting themselves as well as their families and communities" (A/66/212).

International migration is an important component of population dynamics. World population is projected to exceed 9 billion by 2050. Many countries in the global North have low and declining fertility rates, ageing populations and a shrinking labour force. Most of the expected future population growth will be in the global South and will be concentrated in the least developed countries. These demographic realities, combined with the economic difference between the developed and the developing world, ensure that international migration will continue to increase and that it is necessary.

When migration goes wrong, migrants are at risk of trafficking, abuse and exploitation.

The potential benefits of migration — not just financial but also social and cultural — are often ignored in favour of a criminal justice response aimed at stopping irregular migration and strengthening borders. Heightened border security is increasing risks in the migration process, especially in women's migration. Increased border controls and security push migrants to pay higher fees to brokers and take more dangerous routes. Restrictive border policies create a group of people at risk of exploitation in transit and in the workplace — criminalized workers with no rights who can be dismissed at the employer's convenience.

Human trafficking happens in the context of labour migration. Although data is scarce and often inaccurate, the reported growth in human trafficking has coincided with an increase in demand in the international labour market for migrant workers, including in sectors that are not protected by labour laws. In some destination countries, labour markets are already highly dependent on migrant workers, whether permanent, circular or temporary, to fill jobs that the citizens of the countries are unwilling to take. Moreover, ageing populations drive a growing demand for labour, as the ratio of workers to dependents in those countries decreases.

We are seeing, on the one hand, Governments in destination countries clamp down on irregular migration and tighten border controls, often wrongly justifying such moves as measures to stop trafficking. Governments in countries of origin, on the other hand, have been eager to promote overseas labour migration, as remittances contribute to their gross domestic product. State policies determine how much of that migration will be through regular channels.

Women migrants, especially those from the global South, always face the most legal barriers, including for equal access to formal education, freedom of movement and full legal status. Borders, with their official entrance criteria, often rely upon and replicate the issues of gender inequality and restricted access that women already face at home. Migration policies therefore perpetuate the inequality that women face in the labour market, reflecting the international division of labour along gender and racial lines.

Although some progress has been made to minimize the cost of migration, programmes that provide useful training and protect the rights of migrant workers are still at a nascent stage. Migrant workers pay disproportionately high fees, enter places of work without good training and often have nowhere to turn to if they face exploitation and abuse.

Non-discrimination is a core principle established by international human rights law. Governments have a clear obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all individuals, including migrants. However, as the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants pointed out in his presentation to the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, the violence that irregular migrants fear most is that perpetrated or not prevented by States.

Destination States are responsible for the anti-immigration discourses that result in violence against migrants. They also create or acquiesce to conditions that encourage migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Too often, States respond with more violence and criminalize the migrants, denying their rights despite the fact that irregular migration is not a crime.

These restrictive border controls and law enforcement responses to migration are contrary to the demographically driven migrations that meet the development needs of individuals and of our countries. We need migrants, yet too often we demonize and criminalize them, increasing the risk of human rights violations such as human trafficking. Instead, we need a positive response to migration that understands its importance to development and that is mainstreamed into the development strategies of States. Migration both affects and is affected by several of the objectives addressed by the Millennium Development Goals, including those on poverty, environmental sustainability, universal education, gender equality and maternal and child health. As an issue relevant to so many development issues, migration must also be adequately addressed in the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015.

However, migration needs to be included in a way that will be meaningful and effective for migrants, and in that respect migrants and survivors of trafficking are best situated to advise on that. All stakeholders in the migration process must be involved in the formation, implementation and monitoring of policies on migration and against trafficking. A participatory human rights approach to all policies on development, migration and labour is the only way to prevent human trafficking.